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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 6113

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 2169

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RHFJSCC/COMMARFORPAC PRIORITY

RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 006085

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM TH

SUBJECT: COUP REACTION IN THAKSIN-COUNTRY

REF: A. BANGKOK 5812

1B. BANGKOK 5949

1C. BANGKOK 6058

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton, Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. In a visit to gauge sentiments toward the coup in the northeastern city of Khon Kaen, Emboffs were kept under close watch by the local authorities. Local interlocutors also expressed concerns over meeting with us to discuss politics. While NGO and media-types discussed how the bloodless coup was needed to "wipe the slate clean," and is a major step forward in Thailand's "democracy with Thai characteristics," a former TRT MP and a grassroots village head denounced the coup as "seriously undemocratic." Everyone believed that the CDR would follow their announced timeline, but some expressed little faith in the new constitution. The interlocutors also agreed that, although villagers did not like the coup because it ousted Thaksin, they all accept it because it ended the previous political uncertainty. They predicted that the villagers will still vote for Thaksin if and when he returns to Thai politics. End summary.

I'LL BE WATCHING YOU

12. (C) Emboffs visited Khon Kaen, a traditionally Thai-Rak-Thai (TRT) and former PM Thaksin Shinawatra stronghold, on September 28-29 to gauge local sentiments toward the coup. Most contacts expressed concerns about violating edicts banning meeting as part of a group of five people or more to discuss politics (ref A) and asked if their meeting would be reported to the Thai authorities. Emboffs were also closely monitored by local authorities during the entire trip. For example, almost immediately after arrival, PolFSN received a mysterious call on his cell phone asking where he and Poloff were located. In a more bizarre incident, a group of police officers barged in on a meeting with former Foreign Minister (pro-TRT), Krasae Chanawongse, at his office. Although Krasae joked about the police being there for "our protection," he did not say much of substance after the incident while a police officer remained in the room taking notes.

DEMOCRACY WITH THAI CHARACTERISTICS

¶13. (C) With the exception of a former TRT Member of Parliament (MP) and a local TRT village head (who decried the coup as "undemocratic"), a common theme among other contacts was the "inevitability" of the coup. Somphop Bunnag, Advisor to the Northeastern NGOs Coordinating Committee for Rural Development, said the coup was "irrefutable" because it "wiped the slate clean" of Thaksin's corruption and removal of the previous checks and balances system. Although contacts all commented that it was unfortunate that the political stalemate had to be resolved by the military, they claimed nevertheless that the coup was "a step forward" on Thailand's democratic path. A number of interlocutors pointed to the ease of the military takeover, comparing this coup to the bloodshed of the previous ones. Wipatanachai Pimhin, President of the Northern NGOs Coordinating Committee, commented that "at least no one died this time, that counts for an evolution to democracy."

A "SOCIAL CONTRACT"

¶14. (C) When asked if he believed that the CDR would follow its announced timeline for democratic restoration, Chatchai Chathama of the Khon Kaen Association of Mass Media explained that a "social contract" was made with the people the moment the CDR staged a bloodless coup -- a contract under which the people agreed to give the junta temporary control of the country, while the CDR agreed to re-establish a more "democratic" government within the year. If the timeline is not followed, then there would be a "backlash," he added. Therefore, Chatchai had full confidence that the coup leaders would adhere to their established timeline to create a new

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constitution and hold elections. Although Somphop of the NGOs also agreed that the CDR would proceed as promised, he did not express confidence in their political skills, stating that the coup leaders live under a "military culture, and are not familiar with concepts of democracy or civil society." Therefore, he believed that the new constitution "would be no better" than the 1997 Constitution.

WHAT ABOUT THE VILLAGERS?

¶15. (C) Our interlocutors spoke of the villagers' ambivalence toward the current situation. While they "accept the coup because it brought an end to the incessant demonstrations of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)," local farmers could not accept that Thaksin has been ousted. Kamnan Tangsitchanakun, a village head in rural Khon Kaen, told Emboffs that people in his village were still secretly gathering in groups of five or more to discuss their discontent. However, Kamnan was quick to add that these complaints were superficial, and that "no movements" were planned to retaliate against the coup.

¶16. (C) While all contacts claimed that there were no anti-coup movements reported in Khon Kaen, Somphop of the NGOs pointed to the five school burnings earlier in the week in the Northeastern city of Kamphengphet (Reftel B) as evidence of people's agitation against the coup. He warned that more isolated burning might occur. (Note: Two more schools were burned this week in two other cities in the Northeast region (Reftel C). End note.)

WE STILL LOVE THAKSIN!

¶17. (C) Our interlocutors agreed that the villagers were waiting for Thaksin to return. Regardless of when the next election took place, they stipulated that the villagers of

the Northeast and the North would come out in force to vote for Thaksin. When Poloff asked whether the CDR's promise to maintain Thaksin's policies of 30 baht health care (etc.) would eventually diminish people's fondness for Thaksin, one contact scoffed that people know that "it was Thaksin that devised these plans, not the CDR." He added, "people will remember that."

COMMENT

¶8. (C) While we expected that the CDR would have tighter control of the North and Northeast, we did not expect the oppressive atmosphere that inhibited our ability to meet with former TRT officials. Although most contacts eventually began to talk, whispered words and darting eyes were common during the meetings. Villagers' sympathies for Thaksin were also expected. Now that an interim PM has been named, it remains to be seen whether the widely-held respect for Surayud is enough in that region to quiet some of the villagers' hidden discontent. End comment.

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